transcript: An e-Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies
e-ISSN: 2582-9858
Vol. 6, No. 1, January-June 2026, 42-55
https://doi.org/10.53034/Transcript.2026.v06.n01.004

"They have become pursuing prisons": Robin S Ngangom's *My Invented Land* (2023) and the Poetics of Double Witness

Somnath Barui
Jalangi Mahavidyalaya.
Netaji Subhas Open University

Received: 24 June 2025 / Accepted: 2 July 2026 / Published: 11 July 2026

Abstract

The paper asserts that the latest collection *My Invented Land*, by the noted North-East Indian poet Robin Singh Ngangom, contains poems that mostly unearth his unhappy experiences of violence in his native Manipur, detaining him in a permanent state of mental stupor. The present collection *MIL* has been advertently chosen so as to be able to reflect on the key poems from all his four collections, as *MIL* has selected poems from his previous three collections. The paper theoretically binds Ngangom's poetics with the concept of "double witness." This term denotes the act of witnessing violence by an active human agent/witness and the reverse act of witnessing violence by violence itself pursuing that human witness. Clearly, the reverse witness is a case of personification, which is propounded by two proponents in two separate essays: one proponent is Czeslaw Milosz, the Polish poet whose views are incorporated in Sven Birkerts' essay "Last Things First: Czeslaw Milosz's Witness of Poetry" and the other is Shoshana Felman, the American theorist who has the long essay "Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching" included in Cathy Caruth's edited volume *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. The present paper, through the coinage of the term "double witness", emphasises how an active human witness can sometimes be pursued by the violent incident he witnesses.

Keywords: North-East Indian poetry; Robin S Ngangom; *My Invented Land*; trauma; double witness, ethical testimony

Introduction

The paper will employ Canadian critic Mark Vorobej's conception of violence as he writes in his book *The Concept of Violence* (2016). "Violence" in the paper would imply what the Oxford English Dictionary defines as "the exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury on or damage to persons or property" (qtd. in Vorobej 6). In *My Invented Land* (Henceforth *MIL*), Ngangom's utterances have an unmistakable odour of political violence, especially between the insurgents and the counterinsurgents, turning the ordinary people's existential space into a nightmare. Ngangom's poetry has variously been looked at from around the world. But his poems in *MIL* have not been seen through the lens of "double witness"[1] yet. The concept of "active human witness of violence and the reverse witness by violence" will add novelty to this study. "From the Mnemonic to the Literary: Exploring Memory in Select Works of Robin S Ngangom and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih" by Sukla Singha describes how Ngangom's memory of his days in his native state, Manipur, which he left long ago, haunts him continuously. The natural surroundings of Manipur, his happy childhood days,

and the loss of existential peace in people's lives for the presence of violence reinforce his poetics. Shilpi Basak, in her paper "Politics to Poetics: Nationalist Rhetoric and Nationalist Reality in Select Poems of Robin S Ngangom and Agha Shahid Ali" takes on an 'interpretative approach' (40) and looks at Ngangom's poetic output from postcolonial, nationalist, and diasporic perspectives. The paper also highlights how human rights violations have been a common factor after the installation of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA, 1958) in Manipur. In "Historicising Manipur's Social and Political Issues through the Poetry of Robin S Ngangom" Champa Chettri investigates the poetry of Ngangom to find the socio-political dynamics of Manipur in the wake of different ethno-nationalist struggles with the AFSPA regime, to examine "anxiety and fear of the people of the region" (85) and finally establishes how his works are a "testimony of a trying period" (85) helping to historicise the important events of not only Manipur but also of the entire North-East[2] India. Chettri has utilised the term "witness of poetry" but hasn't expounded it with theoretical in-depth analysis; it hangs loose as a commentary on Ngangom's poetry and observes how his "poetry itself is enough evidence of his personal experiences and occurrences in the region" (83). In her review to the collection *MIL,* Anjana Basu focuses on how Ngangom has mainly concentrated on senses of uprootedness and loss of identity in his poetry; the element of witness, the review upholds, is an inherent quality of the poetics of Ngangom. In "The Postcolonial Picturesque: The Poetry of Northeast India" the veteran literary critic and writer Pramod K Nayartakes into account some poems from Ngangom's *The Desire of Roots* (*DR* henceforth) to observe how Ngangom, like Monalisa Changkija (of Nagaland), Desmond Kharmawphlang (of Meghalaya), Thangjam Ibopishak (of Manipur) and Kynpham S Nongkynrih (of Meghalaya), has represented the images of violence through "an aesthetic of suffering", incorporating natural imagery into the representation of death and destruction. Nayar cites lines and phrases from "To Pacha", a poem in his collection *DR,* and then comments: "The withering of the land and the collapse of youth into deranged violence seem to be linked in much of Ngangom, perhaps the most overtly political of the poets writing today" (18-9). Nayar's commentary on Ngangom being "perhaps the most overtly political of the poets" is well qualified when one places him next to other voices like Ibopishak, Changkija, Nongkynrih, and the Mizoram poet Mona Zote et al. Mridul Bordoloi's article "Robin S Ngangom's Poetry: A Critical Study" focuses on poems like "Last Word" and "Native Land" from *MIL* to highlight the way the poet has engaged with questions of identity and violence for decades now. Bordoloi supports Nayar, who speaks about the "savaged picturesque" in Ngangom's poetry represented through an aestheticisation of suffering and writes: "Ngangom's poetry on "home" stands as horrifying testimonies to the collective "trauma of witness"" (Bordoloi 33). The article does not elaborate on the idea of a witness ethically pursuing a witness of violence, nor does it incorporate theoretical discussion to delve deep into the poetics in *MIL*. Thus, Ngangom's poetry has been seen through trauma, memory and witness and other interpretative theoretical perspectives. But the curious way the present paper focuses on Ngangom poetics in *MIL* through "double witness" has never been approached yet. The paper therefore purports to offer something new in the poetics of Ngangom in particular and North-East poetics in general. It endeavours to show how the poetry of witness becomes meaningful only when seen through the lens of double witness.

The excerpt in the paper title is originally from Ngangom's poem "The Strange Affair of Robin S Ngangom" that was first published in his third poetry collection, *The Desire of Roots* (2006). But along with a few happy hermetic moments, the poems in that collection also express a poet's soul evidently endeavouring to grapple with the reality of violence between the insurgency groups and the Indian Union-backed counterinsurgent army personnel in Manipur. Many poems in *MIL* make it clear how the traumatised poet finds it impossible to

get rid of the image of witnessed violence pursuing him like a living force. This personification of violence pursuing a witness, or a poet-witness for that matter, is actually a symbolic representation of an ethical compulsion on the part of the poet-witness who needs to put the images of suffering into words in order to testify. Thus, "double witness" is the cause of the traumatic theory of "testimony", the final outcome of an experience of trauma as available in theoretical works of Cathy Caruth, Dori Laub, Judith Herman, Kali Tal et al. In the present enterprise, the poet-witness Ngangom, held in the image of violence and bloodshed, is a permanent mourner wailing elegiac notes for all the victims of violence—living or dead—in his poetics of double witness.

Robin S Ngangom, born and brought up in the North-East Indian state of Manipur, had shifted to another state in the region, Meghalaya, early in his career. He published his first collection, *Words and the Silence,* in 1988, a time of transition in North-East India marked by social, political, and cultural upheavals. It was a time when the Assam Movement[3] (1979-85) had already left its scars, and various incidents of violence[4] had crippled normal lived experience. And it is this normal lived experience that matters to Ngangom the most. In his poems, he reiterates the suffering of the people in order to highlight the pathos of their daily negotiation with violence. If one goes through the poems in *MIL*, one finds Ngangom's deepest feelings for the lack of this normalcy of peaceful co-existence. As Milosz has time and again remembered his Wilno (the Lithuanian city where he spent the formative years of his youth) and its deterioration in the face of Nazism and other global forces like Capitalism, Ngangom is similarly upset with the dreary condition of Manipur as well as the entire North-East in the wake of colonial and post-colonial eras, under the British and the Indian Union respectively. But violence does not drop abruptly on a scene. Therefore, an outline of the history of violence becomes a critical parameter to understand the poetic messages intended by Ngangom here. Contextually, the next section, "Outlining North-East Violence History," incorporates a brief historical overview of how violence descended on the entire North-East region in the first half of the nineteenth century with the advent of the British colonialists. The different ethnic and tribal peoples living in the region for several hundred years could not escape from the divisive strategies of the British. Then, as the section further argues, the North-Easterners had to struggle again under the postcolonial Indian regime due mainly to the strategic militarisation of almost all the North-East states. The section also highlights that the existence of insurgency and the age-old internecine conflicts among the various ethnicities and tribal people, along with the two significant historical factors mentioned just above, have made violence endemic here. The paper, thus establishing the prevalence of violence, discusses in the subsequent chapter titled "*MIL* and the Poetics of Witness: A Foray into a Poet's Mind" how the witness of this multi-layered violence has constructed Ngangom's poetic self. It shows how he has hardly been able to come out of his sense of responsibility as a teller of truth. The theoretical thread of 'double witness' is used to explain the poems in *MIL*. The "Conclusion" brings together different resistant voices from different totalitarian regimes of history, who have testified out of their troubled psyche. Many of them, needless to say, are Ngangom's inspiration. Methodologically, the paper has used "Textual Analysis" and has analysed different books and articles that have shaped the present study.

Outlining North-East Violence History

One familiar with eight North-East Indian states (namely Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura) curiously notes the distinct history of violence of this region, geographically wedged between South and Southeast Asia. Except for Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh, all six states have been subject to multiple

incidents of violence that have claimed many lives. Sajal Nag, in his *Roots of Ethnic Conflict: Nationality Question in North-East India* (1990), underlines that the Ahoms, the first known rulers of Assam, came into Assam in the thirteenth century from the neighbouring countries of China and Myanmar (15). The complex international borders and their paraphernalia of formalities for cross-border movements were absent in those days. Borders were fluid, and demographic movement was smooth and needs-oriented. The Ahoms, for example, invited, as Nag continues, a lot of "high caste Hindus" (25) from Bengal (now known as West Bengal, a state in the Indian Union) for agricultural and religious manpower. The Ahoms lived in the plains of the Brahmaputra River, while the hilly areas were occupied by native tribal people. These people had a distinct relationship with regard to the exchange of goods as a marker of mutual understanding and interests. Contextually, it has to be noted that Assam used to be a vast geographical area that was divided into Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland later.[5] Manipur and Tripura had separate independent kingdoms, while Sikkim was annexed unlawfully to India, as Sunanda K Datta-Ray affirms in her book *Smash and Grab: Annexation of Sikkim* (1984). Arunachal Pradesh was known as the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) due to its proximity to international borders with Tibet and China.

The situation first deteriorated in 1826 when the imperialist British took control of the North-East from the Burmese (now Myanmar) forces. They also made sure that the tribals of the hilly regions were obstructed from interacting with the plains people so that their mutual co-operation could never threaten the status quo. Inner Line Regulations of 1873[6] were initiated. Anglo-Manipuri War (1891), Anglo-Kuki War (1917-19), and Jadonang Revolt (1930-31) are some of the historical exemplars that opened the eyes of the North-Easterners who grew up with profound hatred against the British or foreigners. This notion crystallises when one reads, for example, Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) and *The Black Hill* (2014). The latter book records the killing of two good-natured French missionary priests, Father Krick and Bourry, who reach the hilly regions of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam bordering Tibet and are seen by the locals as "intruders" having nefarious plots in their minds. And Mamang Dai's novel is based on events around the same time in the 19th century. After the Indian Union took over in 1947, Nagaland demanded self-determination through armed struggle by the Naga National Council (NNC) under the leadership of Angami Zapu Phizo. Major militant groups like the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), People's Liberation Army (PLA), United National Liberation Front (UNLF), United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), Mizo National Front (MNF) mushroomed over a period of three decades in states like Assam, Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya and Mizoram. But the problem started thereafter. Most of these militant groups had contesting ideologies—if some group demanded total secession from India, the other wanted partial freedom while remaining well under the federal structure of the Indian Union. Internecine conflicts were prevalent among different ethnicities for matters relating to territorial demarcation. Again, for example, Dai depicts the feuds between the Abor and Mishmee tribes' conscious of their territory in her *The Black Hill* (26 & 69). Moreover, different developmental projects of the government also face obstruction for ecological reasons, for the North-Easterners don't accept industrial or urban progress at the cost of nature. Besides, the installation of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA, 1958) by the Indian Union in these militant-infested states as a counterbalancing mechanism to curb insurgency and secessionist activities has often made newspaper headlines in the last few decades, in which the AFSPA personnel who cannot be charged for any botched military operation continue to kill and disturb normal existence. As Pushpita Das writes in her paper "The History of Armed Forces Special Powers Act": "Section 6 [of the Act] provides immunity to the armed forces personnel against arrest or

prosecution for anything done or alleged to have been done in the discharge of official duties except after obtaining the consent of the central government" (15). This immunity has therefore perpetuated a fashion of indiscriminate killing, and commentators on AFSPA have variously expressed how 'obtaining the consent of the central government' is a rarity. The confrontation with anything suspicious continues with the irrevocable outcome of killing and anarchy in the whole of the North-East. So, the ordinary people have to suffer from dangers from both ends of the blade—the insurgents who fight amongst themselves and victimise normal lives on one hand and the counterinsurgents who are trained to kill on the slightest of doubts. Deborshi Brahmachari in his article "Ethnicity and Violent Conflicts in Northeast India: Analysing the Trends" details the trends of killing by both these contending parties through the presentation of statistical data of violence-related deaths from 1990 to 2016 (285-91) and shows how states like Manipur and Assam continuously feature in the list for recording higher number of murders by various insurgency outfits as well as the counterinsurgency units. The heterogeneity of the geopolitical region, with the presence of over 200 ethnic and tribal communities with their distinctive socio-cultural choice patterns, has turned it into a stereotypical existential space in South Asia. As Norwegian conflict theorist Johan Galtung posits in *Handbook of Peace and Conflict Studies,* the tussle of "incompatible goals" (14) brings in violence as a natural consequence. The 2023 escalations of violence between the Meiteis, the largest higher caste population in Manipur, and Kukis, the tribals living in the hills of the state, uphold the truth that India's North-East is an endemically violent sub-national region.[7]

MIL and the Poetics of Witness: A Foray into a Poet's Mind

The title *My Invented Land* is a curious choice. The eponymous poem hints at the reason behind the choice of the word *invented (*not, *discovered).* Cambridge Dictionary defines "to invent" as "to design and/or create something that has never been made before". Accordingly, the land of Manipur (as well as the North-East) has been invented by violence, which, in its various postmodern outfits, was never a part of North-East life-world. This implies, to a great extent, the militarisation of the North-East through AFSPA that has raised ethical questions regarding the Indian Union's intentions. Malem Ningthouja's paper "Violence and Terror under AFSPA 1958 and the People's Movement against It" highlights, from interviews and ethnographic data based in Manipur, the way AFSPA 1958 retains the Armed Forces Special Powers Ordinance, 1942, promulgated by the colonial British regime in India in all its negative implications. He states overtly, "[v]iolence and its aftermath experienced by the people include cold-blooded fake encounters, massacre, torture, harassment, illegal detention, forced disappearance, killing as a result of 'mistaken identity', rape, molestation, sodomy, post-traumatic stress disorder and destruction of property" (Ningthouja 58). It is the ordinary people who ultimately have to succumb to the evils of violence: "forced disappearance" takes place when an ordinary innocent North-Easterner is made to suspend all his normal life activities for some ban imposed on him for his supposed anti-India sentiments whereas he may sometimes be taken for a militant and killed (i.e., mistakenly identified by the AFSPA soldiers). This unimaginable crisis was once negotiated by the ordinary people of Assam too (as well as in the other "disturbed"[8] states as mentioned above) in the most active years of ULFA militancy in the last two decades of the last century.

Ngangom's poems in *MIL* exude a historical consciousness, but the way the poet describes his own experiences in Manipur of the killings perpetrated by both the insurgents and counterinsurgents, of how his young acquaintances became sharpshooters, of how soldiers brought death into their beautiful natural surroundings, amply illustrates his preoccupation

with these two agents of violence. The following lines from the eponymous poem "My Invented Land" may symbolically justify this claim,

> My home is a gun
> pressed against both temples
> a knock on a night that has not ended
> a torch lit long after the theft
> a sonnet about body counts (*MIL*145)

The phrase "both temples" suggests the two parties in continuous confrontation since 1958, and the phrase "body counts" not only indicates the fated numerical representation of casualties in violence but also the urgency of counting the dead bodies for the government to (mis)represent their success in curbing the menace of militancy or anti-nationalism. Besides, the poet's metaphorical reference to his homeland being "a torch lit long after the theft" suggests the meaningless efforts of excavating the past that can never be changed. In the introduction to *MIL*, a slightly modified version of his article "Poetry in the Time of Terror", he speaks about his conversation with a Manipuri poet regarding "'the poetry of survival' with guns pressed to both temples: the gun of revolution and the gun of the state" (16).

"The Strange Affair of Robin S Ngangom" is an autobiographical poem that despairs of the fate of his homeland. After describing his nostalgic childhood days, he turns his attention to the militants and counter-militants transforming the area into what is known as the Agambenian space of "exception."[9] The sense of history, which is referred to as a "hunch-backed friend" (Ngangom, *MIL*114), makes the poet mourn their "merger with a nation [i.e., India]" (113). But the way the revolutionaries of his land preach of preserving native traditions and culture and yet lose track of their ideological integrity by killing their own people indicates the insufficiency of their cause. The dejected poet utters,

> patriotism is admiring
> the youth who fondles grenades,
> patriotism is proclaiming all men as brothers
> and secretly depriving my brother,
> patriotism is playing the music of guns
> to the child in the womb. (114)

The concept of "witness" is interlinked, as has already been stated, with the idea of testimony. Witnessing the images of destruction, as the above excerpt implies, has an immediacy in terms of its effort to let those images out. The notion of "testimony" is therefore of great urgency not only to relieve oneself from the burden of violent memories but also to ethically try to warn humanity about the ghastliness of the dangers of political modernity. Almost all theories of trauma propounded by the likes of Dori Laub or Kali Tal or Judith Herman et al are based on the idea of "testimony"—a word-of-mouth account of the experiences of trauma by a survivor, e.g., the testimonies of Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust survivor. Shoshana Felman, in her aforementioned essay, underlines the importance of what it means to "bear witness": "To bear witness is to *bear the solitude* of a responsibility, and to *bear the responsibility*, precisely, of that solitude" (15). Ngangom's lines uttered above speak, most importantly, of the reverse witness or Felmanian sense of inherent ethical responsibility of his post-witness solitude. If we refer to the poem "Children's Market" by Thangjam Ibopishak, a vernacular Manipuri poet, we are introduced to poetic reactions that resemble Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729), where Swift astounded the then English society

with his macabre satire. Ibopishak, stunned by the extreme violence of his land, surrealistically proposes to sell children killed by bullets. The freshness of the child's flesh is referred to time and again by the seller in these terms:

> It's still hopping
> its body very fresh
> it was struck by just one bullet;
> you won't find anything fresher
> than this one, my friend. (Ibopishak 25)

The poet, feeling the urgency of exterminating "the enemy of the people" (Ngangom112), initially has conviction about the insurgent activities, but can't finally approve their unleashing of grenades and guns on his own fellow brothers. This disillusionment holds the key to the poem, and the poet, just like Walcott as he expresses his dilemma towards the end of his poem "A Far Cry from Africa", utters, "But where can one run from the homeland/ where can I flee from your love?" (116). The counterinsurgents' inhuman transformation of the beautiful hills into coffins through the "appliances of death and devastation" (111) has also been mourned, but the boomerang of ideological love of the land hitting his own people in the form of hate is something that continually tortures his feelings. He strives hard but can't come out of this mnemonic prison that gnaws at him. The poem "Native Land" embodies similar angst where the poet seems to disengage himself from patriotic movements through such musings—

> ...when the days
> absolved the butchers, I continue to live
> as if nothing happened. (25)

But the mnemonic cycle continues, and the poet can't help thinking of the plight of his native land and people. In "The First Rain," he asks himself, "Is it better to rejoice and forget/ or to remember and be sad?" (*MIL*120). And he chooses the second option. The trauma of witnessing the violence is unacceptable, but the contrast lies in the fact that the traumatic event continues to pursue unless it is testified to. This double tension becomes obvious in the words of Judith Herman, who observes, "The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma" (1).

Now, if we go back, we see the same mourning poet in his first collection, *Words and the Silence* (1988). In the poem "Homeland I Left," he rues the "wicked war" (Ngangom, *MIL*, 26) in which "bloody bodies [get] dragged unceremoniously/ through [their] rice fields..." (26). "To a Valley Known as Imphal" remembers the raining of bombs in which many lives "perished in bewilderment" (27). Felman, while analysing Paul Celan's representation of his Holocaust experiences in his verse-testimonies, speaks of the latter's "unbearable ordeal of having to endure, absorb, continue to *take in* with no end and no limit" (35). The emphasis on the verbal phrase "take in" signifies what Felman can be taken to imply as a "reverse witness": not only to witness catastrophes like the Holocaust but "be in turn witnessed by it" (36). The survivor-witness or the poet-witness (both are applicable to Celan here) is not the sole active agent of the act of witness; the case has been reversed to give agency to "violence" now witnessing the now-passive human agent, the poet. The human witness who witnesses violent history unfold before him is in turn witnessed by history/violent historical event that tests his ethics or morality until the testimony of poetry is produced. In his essay

"Last Things First: Czeslaw Milosz's Witness of Poetry," Sven Birkerts talks about the "apocalyptic" poetry that concerns the post-war futuristic view of a dystopian society as embodied in the great Polish poet Milosz. Birkerts refers to Milosz's "Norton Lectures at Harvard in the winter of 1981-2" (113), which Milosz titled *The Witness of Poetry*, and subsequently writes about how Milosz looked at the interrelationship between poetry and history. Milosz posits, as Birkerts continues, that we witness history which also "witnesses us" (113). "Milosz recognises", as Birkerts moves on with his discussion, "that history has forced a change upon poetry" (125). Thus, "history" or violent catastrophic event/reality, like the Holocaust, as Milosz imbricates, acts as a psychical force bringing "change" not only to poetic imagery and vocabulary but also to the ethical perceptions of reality. Herein lies the exigency of "responsibility" promulgated by Felman. This sense of responsibility in the context of witnessing violence is embedded in Ngangom's essay "Poetry in the Time of Terror," where he speaks of the urgency to "master 'the art of witness'" (171) in the face of the "banality of terror" (171).

The collection *MIL* also describes the loss of the old glory of Hynniew Trep, the land of the seven huts (generally, East Khasi Hills in Meghalaya), after myriad conflicts and bloodletting not specified by the poet, who is a permanent resident of Meghalaya. In *Time's Crossroads* (1994), Ngangom's next collection, the remembrance intensifies in poems like "From 'The Book of Grievances'", "Imphal," etc. In the former poem, Ngangom wails,

> Time ran out in Oinam, in Ukhrul
> when they who gave us a republic,
> brought *reconcentrados* from the Americas,
> watched impassively the smoking fields,
> prodded with clubs the bruised vagina,
> the shocked testis. We became
> impotent in the face of mortification. (Ngangom, *MIL* 58)

These lines not only portray the trauma of the poet's revolutionary brothers and their pathetic "mortification" and failure in the face of torture by the counterinsurgents but also shock the readers with sexually explicit imageries by introducing them to the way the Indian Union resembled Spanish regime in Cuba in the last decade of the nineteenth century to suppress Cuban insurrection through *reconcentrados,* the forceful concentration of Cuban public so that they can't join hands with the revolutionaries. Life in symbolic places like Oinam and Ukhrul, two sites in Manipur, has, over the years, faced an Indian *reconcentrados,* as Ngangom suggests. The poet then rues the fate of his land in "Imphal" thus:

> There is something sadly inevitable
> about this land, something inescapable,
> like a beast which stalks its own death,
> like an ominous prophecy
> of men clad in red going to war (61)

The inevitability of death, for those who are actively engaged in the revolution as well as those ordinary people who get killed for no fault of their own, is vividly represented here with the image of redness. Milosz's idea of the change of poetic imagery under the heavy pressure of historical events becomes evident here. Recalling his childhood memories, he moons over how some of his rowdy friends became the pioneers of a "subversive outfit" (Ngangom62) or militancy cadre to dish out deaths. But he somewhat culpably asserts his

own responsibility for assessing (which, sadly enough, he can't do anymore) the situation worsening in places like "Ukhrul" (63):

> I should have monitored
> the boys shot down and
> counted the soldiers
> they ambushed. (62)

This again points to the unending insurgent-counterinsurgent scuffle in which both parties finally happen to lose some of their members. The same situation persists in *DR,* where poems like "Revolutionaries" and "Bad Places" underline the fated fight between the two parties with heavy casualties. The poem ''Revolutionaries'' is autobiographical, like many poems in the collection, including "The Strange Affair of Robin S Ngangom", which affirms, "I grew up with revolutionaries" (*MIL* 99). And both poems depict with the same intensity of feeling the end-result of gruesome murder and bloodshed, making the poet lock horns with his responsibility of tortured solitude. Herman says that "the study of psychological trauma is an inherently political enterprise because it calls attention to the experience of oppressed people" (237). Needless to say, Ngangom's perpetual state of agony is the result of his sympathetic siding with the "oppressed"/otherised people of the North-East who are prey to political violence.

In the New Poems of *MIL,* the memory of violence continues to haunt him. In the very first poem titled "15 August 2008, Northeast India," he startlingly begins by asking, "Having lost it/ how could I celebrate my independence" (Ngangom 137), suggesting that North-East India hasn't yet tasted freedom proper like the mainland[10] Indians. Ngangom, a citizen of peripheral India, hits back by referring to the AFSPA indirectly and the ills it brings: "...a law has been enacted for them/ which finds all of them culpable for shaming the nation./ And fifty years of discrimination festering in the periphery/ with another anniversary of murder and disappearances" (138). Due to this asymmetrical governance by the Indian Union that fails to do justice to its citizens in the North-East fringe, the poet deeply wails, "My native place has not been christened yet/ my homeland, a travelogue without end" (144). In "Winter Chronicle" he symbolically suggests the despair-lore of his people and terms it as "winter-to-winter sadness" (165). This is something like a "talking cure" (Herman 25) which Vietnam veterans indulged themselves in after returning from the war with their "war experiences" (27). Describing the cunning of leaders and politicians in devising ways of torture and then covering them up with verbal wizardry, the poet underscores how man has "emerged from his prehistoric/ cave...[and] surpassed his feral brethren, and perfected/ savagery..." (Ngangom, *MIL*163-4). This is not only an expression of witness, but an act of dissent also—a symbolic gesture of protest against injustice. Knowing what will inevitably befall his people again, the poet utters lyrically and symbolically, "...night conspires with/ the wind whispering black secrets once more" (165). Needless to say, the poet has taken refuge in symbols here to urge himself to give testimony. A similar kind of symbolism is discernible in many poems of Khasi poet Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Ngangom's contemporary and former colleague at the North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya. In his poem "Pain" encased in the poetry collection *The Yearning of Seeds* (2011), Nongkynrih, in an all-round mood of despair, contrasts the beauty of the hills of Meghalaya thus: "In the gathering gloom/I watched the early moon, waiting/for the night to thicken" (101). Similar strains of symbolic thought can be found in poems like "The Empty Coffin" (25-6) and "My Hills" (48-9) by the veteran Temsula Ao, the famous poet from Nagaland. In her edited volume *Witness: The Red River Book of Poetry of Dissent* (2021), Nabina Das talks of the role of poets as dissenters who "are

witness to terrible tales" (8). The poetry of Milosz or Paul Celan or Ngangom, as has already been discussed, is all poetry of this dissent besides being poetry of ethical testimony.

Conclusion

What Ngangom has recorded in *MIL* is what Cherrie L. Chhangte, in her essay "Loneliness in the Midst of Curfews: The Mizo Insurgency Movement and Terror Lore" published in The *Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India* edited by Tilottoma Misra, terms "terror lore" (237). Coined by the Meghalayan poet and cultural critic Dr Desmond Kharmawphlang, the term "terror lore" denotes "the type of lore that emerges in a society as a result of the fear and insecurity that people collectively undergo" (Misra237). Chhangte in the essay writes how pressed between the insurgents of Mizo National Front (MNF) on one hand and the Central Indian Government forces (AFSPA personnel) on the other, the "people literally lived between the hammer and the anvil" (238). The long period—from 1988 to 2023, the period of his poetic career so far—offers Ngangom little scope for any oscillation between hope and despair, for it is despair that has always nestled in his backyards. North-East India is a uniquely beautiful landscape where "terror-lore" suits ill, as most poets named above seem to suggest. Poets from the region have produced these apparently ill-fitting, contrasting poems. The reason, as Ngangom clarifies in the introduction, is inscribed in "I Explain a Few Things" by the famous Spanish poet Pablo Neruda, one of Ngangom's dearly loved mentors. In the poem, Neruda justifies his poetry of dissent or resistance by saying that he can't speak of the beauty of Spanish women or volcanoes of his native land because of the "blood in the streets" (27). He suggests the evils of the Spanish Civil War here. The frustration of a poet held in the prison of his double witness painted here reverberates in Anna Akhmatova too, the great Russian poet who silently kept on chronicling the state-sponsored torture of the Stalinist regime. In the prologue of her poem "Requiem," Akhmatova writes,
In those years only the dead smiled,

> Glad to be at rest:
> And Leningrad city swayed like
> A needless appendix to its prisons.
> It was then that the railway-yards
> Were asylums of the mad;
> Short were the locomotives'
> Farewell songs.
> Stars of death stood
> Above us, and innocent Russia
> Writhed under bloodstained boots… (89)

The imagery and symbolism contained in these lines hardly need an explication. In many of his poems, Ngangom draws inspiration from this extremely determined poet who suffered various tortures and yet didn't stop dissenting. The lines above are not only a scribble of protest or dissent: a strong feeling runs parallel that gives the poetry its eternal appeal. Ngangom hasn't changed over four decades of his poetic output. He is always locked up in his world of anxieties; the fate of his homeland lying in utter disarray, the continuous reporting of killing and bloodletting, the North-East's fated merger with Indian Union reinstating AFSPA with tighter grips each year, the angst born out of his concern for future, the promised glorious struggle for self-determination of his own brothers and their discombobulating betrayal—all hold him in thrall, in a prison-like stance. But he has been mentored by the likes of Neruda, Lorca, and Akhmatova, and he has decided to live on and

"mourn the fate of [his] homeland" (Ngangom13) a la the Sicilian poet Quasimodo. In the introduction to *Complete Poems,* Jack Bevan talks of the Sicilian poet Quasimodo thus: "In the war he wrote of human dignity, mortal aspiration, man's inhumanity, both as general themes and as closely felt personal experiences" (17). This is something that applies well to Ngangom's poems in *MIL*. Ngangom has also followed in the footsteps of the famous Russian author Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who espoused the poet's responsibility in transmitting the "pains and fears" (*MIL*17) of his society. He has pronounced each word in *MIL*"from a private hurt" (21). Contextually, it may well be ascertained that Ngangom's poetry distils the Owenian "pity of war." Ngangom's poetry "lies in the pity" he feels for those ordinary hapless people of his homeland whose unending plight chains him mnemonically into a permanent prison of agony that pursues him.

End notes

1. The researcher is using this term for the first time. It has never appeared in any article so far as his knowledge is concerned. It aims to be an addition to the tradition of Ngangom scholarship in particular and that of the poetry of witness in general.
2. The paper will use, all along, a hyphenated styling of the phrase "North-East" among other varieties like "Northeast", "north-east" etc. available in many books and articles.
3. The Assam Movement was an anti-foreigner campaign in Assam. After the 1971 partition of Bengal, Assam's demography changed completely because of infiltration of Bangladeshi (formerly Bengal, a part of India but now a sovereign country predominantly inhabited by Bengali Muslims, with a sizable Hindu population too) immigrants from the adjacent Mymensingh and Sylhet districts. The spokespersons of the Movement were worried about the impact of these immigrants on the electoral process. As Assam was predominantly a Hindu society, the immigrant Muslim Bengalis were their main concern. From 1979 to 1985, the Movement saw the mobilisation of the masses against these Muslim immigrants who were foreigners to them. Gohpur Massacre (1983) and Nellie Massacre (1983) were two incidents that cost a lot of lives. Assam exerted a lot of influence over the other North-East states during this prolonged period of violence.
4. Mainly caused by the insurgency-counterinsurgency face-off. Counterinsurgents here chiefly mean the military personnel (engaged through AFSPA, 1958) who can interrogate and kill anyone on suspicion with full impunity. This has been variously interpreted as a draconian law by many commentators who think that this law creates distrust among the North-East peoples regarding the Indian Union's real intentions.
5. Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram became parts of India in 1972. Assam's Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills were integrated to create the state of Meghalaya in the same year. Nagaland got statehood in India in1963.
6. By starting this, the British didn't allow the plains people of Assam to enter the hilly areas of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura and Nagaland (states that were later created out of Assam after Indian independence). The preface to *North-East India: Land, People and Economy* (2014) by K R Dikshit and Jutta K Dikshit comments in detail on this (p. vi).
7. *Amnesty International India* (AII) reports that more than 250 people lost their lives and more than 60,000 people were displaced in the ethnic conflict that started in May, 2023 and continued till February, 2025 (https://www.amnesty.org, 11 Feb, 2025, unpaginated).
8. In *Borderland City in New India: Frontier to Gateway* (2016), Duncan McDuie Ra writes how the 'seven sisters' (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya,

Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura) "have had at least some of their territory declared a 'disturbed area' in the last six decades" (18). The only exception is the state of Sikkim. The author then defines a 'disturbed area' by affirming that in such an area only the Ministry of Home Affairs or the Governor of the respective state can decide upon the exercise of "extraordinary laws" (18) like AFSPA. It is again stressed that the law informs about the periodic review of the amount of disturbance in the areas. But what happens in the North-East is that such laws only get extended for decades, and the AFSPA operates with full legal impunity in such areas, causing a "disturbing reality" (18) of violence, murder and disquietude.

9. Giorgio Agamben in his *State of Exception* (2005, translated by Kevin Attell, The University of Chicago Press) mentions how modern nation-states create this exceptional space where people are left to die/killed through the exercise of exceptional laws, first realised during Hitler's regime during the Second World War. Not only State agencies but non-state actors like militants are also held responsible for creating such a space of exception within democratic frameworks.
10. The "mainland" refers to non-Northeast India, esp. the metropolitan cities like Mumbai and New Delhi, etc. where all sorts of modern amenities are available, and life is well insulated with all kinds of security.

Acknowledgement: Nil
Conflict of Interest Declaration: The author declared no potential conflicts of interest about the research, authorship, and publication of this article.
Artificial Intelligence usage: Nil
Funding: Not applicable

Works Cited

Akhmatova, Anna. *Anna Akhmatova: Selected Poems*. Translated by D M Thomas, Vintage Books, 2009.

Ao, Temsula. *Songs of Many Moods: A Collection of Poems*. Har-Anand Publications, 1995.

Basak, Shilpi. "Politics to Poetics: Nationalist Rhetoric and Nationalist Reality in Select poems of Robin S Ngangom and Agha Shahid Ali." *RAY: International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, v. VII, no. 2, October 2022, pp. 40-48, https://chakdahacollege.ac.in/journal/25/Pdf/Latest/oct22/50-7(2)-Shilpi%20Basak-40-48.pdf Accessed 10 May 2026

Basu, Anjana. "Witnessing the Daily Siege: Book Review by AnjanaBasu." Unpaginated, https://modernliterature.org/my-invented-land-new-and-selected-poems-robin-s-ngangom/ Accessed 10 May 2026

Birkerts, Sven. "Last Things First: Czeslaw Milosz's Witness of Poetry." *The Agni Review*, 1983, no. 19 (1983), pp. 113-29, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23008119.

Bordoloi, Mridul. "Robin S Ngangom's Poetry: A Critical Study." *Poetry without Fear*, vol. III, no. 2, Aug-Oct 2024, pp. 27-33, https://poetrywithoutfear.com

Brahmachari, Deborshi. "Ethnicity and Violent Conflicts in Northeast India: Analysing the Trends."*Strategic Analysis*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2019, pp. 278-296, https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2019.1623497.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. The Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

Chettri, Champa. “Historicising Manipur's Social and Political Issues through the Poetry of Robin S Ngangom.” *Language in India*, vol. 19, no. 4, April 2019, pp. 77-86.

Chhangte, Cherrie L. “Loneliness in the Midst of Curfews: The Mizo Insurgency Movement and Terror Lore.” *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays*, edited by Tilottoma Misra, Oxford U P, 2011, pp. 237-44.

Dai, Mamang. *The Black Hill*. Aleph Book Company, 2014.

Datta-Ray, Sunanda K. *Smash and Grab: Annexation of Sikkim*. Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd, 1984.

Das, Nabina, editor. *Witness: The Red River Book of Poetry of Dissent*. Red River, 2021.

Das, Pushpita. “The History of Armed Forces Special Powers Act.” *Armed Forces Special Powers Act: The Debate*, edited by Vivek Chadha, Lancer's Books, 2013, pp. 10-21.

Felman, Shoshana. “Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching.” *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. 13-60.

Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Basic Books, 1992.

Ibopishak, Thangjam. *The Smell of Man: Selected Poems*. Translated by Robin S Ngangom, Red River, 2021.

Laub, Dori. “Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle.” *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. 61-75.

Nag, Sajal. *Roots of Ethnic Conflict—Nationality Question in North-East India*. Manohar, 1990.

Nayar, Pramod K. “The Postcolonial Picturesque: The Poetry of Northeast India.” *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2008, pp. 5-21, https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.9124.

Neruda, Pablo. *Pablo Neruda: Selected Poems*. Aedha Imprints, 2024.

Ngangom, Robin S. *My Invented Land*. Speaking Tiger Books, 2023.

Ngangom, Robin S. “Poetry in the Time of Terror.” *Indian Literature*, vol. 49, no. 3 (227), 2005, pp. 168-174.

Ningthouja, Malem. “Violence and Terror under AFSPA 1958 and the People’s Movement against It.” *Northeast India: A Reader*, edited by Bhagat Oinam and Dhiren A. Sadokpam, Routledge, 2018, pp. 55-68.

Nongkynrih, Kynpham Sing. *The Yearning of Seeds*. HarperCollins, 2011.

Quasimodo, Salvatore. *Salvatore Quasimodo: Complete Poems*. Translated by Jack Bevan, Carcanet, 2021.

Singha, Sukla. “From the Mnemonic to the Literary: Exploring Memory in Select Works of Robin S Ngangom and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih.” *Bharatiya Pragna: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Indian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2016, pp. 17-31, https://dx.doi.org/10.21659/bp.v1n3.s203.

Swift, Jonathan. *A Modest Proposal*. The Project Gutenberg Ebook, 2008.

Tal, Kali. *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literature of Trauma*. Cambridge UP, 1996.

Vorobej, Mark. *The Concept of Violence*. Routledge, 2016.

Walcott, Derek. *Poems*. Poem Hunter, 2012.

Webel, Charles, and Johan Galtung, editors. *Handbook of Peace and Conflict Studies.* Routledge, 2007.

Bio note

Somnath Barui, originally belonging to Kalna in the district of Purba Bardhaman, West Bengal, is an Assistant Professor of English at Jalangi Mahavidyalaya in West Bengal and a research scholar in the department of English, Netaji Subhas Open University, Kolkata. His short story "SMOKING IS PROHIBITED" was published by *Asiatic*, a Scopus-indexed journal, in 2022. He has also self-published a poetry collection, *Reflections,* from Notion Press. His research interests include English romanticism, women's studies and gender studies, among others.

Open Access
This article is distributed under the terms of the Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits any use, reproduction, and distribution of the work without further permission.
For more information, log on to *http://thetranscript.in/*
© Author